

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH GENERAL DOUGLAS STONE, DEPUTY COMMANDING GENERAL, DETAINEE OPERATIONS, MULTINATIONAL FORCE IRAQ, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 9:00 A.M. EDT DATE: MONDAY, AUGUST 6, 2007

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): And if General Stone's ready, we can begin.

GEN. STONE: Okay. I'm yours. Who is this I'm talking to?

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir. I'm Jack Holt with New Media at OSD. And welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable for this Monday morning. Thank you, sir, for spending time with us and helping us to - and explaining to us about detainee operations and Task Force 134.

Do you have an opening statement, sir?

GEN. STONE: You know, I just wanted to mention, I guess, at the beginning that what we're trying to do is reposition our detainee ops from what I guess you probably know has been sort of a holding pattern to some very important strategic component of our current counterinsurgency effort. And we're doing that all with the effort to disengage these detainees from any kind of future extremist activities. We've launched an extensive amount of study into who they are, how they act, what they're doing, what their motivation is, their morale. We've begun to categorize them. We've begun to create new programs to address each one of those categorizations, all with an effort to remove this insurgent from the battlefield after we reintegrate them.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. And somebody just joined us. Who is that?

Q Yeah. Bruce McQuain with QandO.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Bruce. We're getting started here.

All right, sir. And Andrew Lubin, you were first on the line. Why don't you get us started?

Q Great. General, good afternoon. This is Andrew Lubin from ON Point. I appreciate you taking the time with us.

First of all, let me say semper fi. My son just re-upped last week for a second contract in the Corps. So with luck, he'll be over -- (off mike) -- in a couple weeks.

GEN. STONE: Hoorah!

Q Yes, sir. Hoorah! He was past of Task Force Taro back in 2003, and looking for another go at it.

GEN. STONE: Good.

Q Sir, can you talk to us a bit about Task Force 134 and also detainees? Are you -- when we hear "detainees," we think of people in Guantanamo Bay. Are you looking at Gitmo detainees or just normal insurgents who you yank out of Ramadi or Sakalaweyah or someplace?

GEN. STONE: You know, we're looking at a broad spectrum of them. But the -- but they far more look -- and they look much more like the everyday guy that might have been on the field that was involved with the insurgent -- what we know about them -- and I don't know if you caught the opening statement, but we're really studying them now. What we know about them is that they are largely unemployed. The biggest percentage are in this for the money.

The second-largest percentage have been engaged because of fear or threats that if they didn't, they would be, you know, destroyed or their family hurt.

The third-largest group has to do with just a -- you know, a consideration about the nation. They have a nationalism bent towards them, and they just want to fight the occupation. They are engaged in anti-coalition facilities, anti-coalition engagement. And then the last group and the very smallest group, although, frankly, the most powerful group are these jihadists who are wedded to, you know, a very corrupt view of Islam.

Q Okay. When I was in -- yeah, Jack, can we -- do we have many people? Can I follow up?

MR. HOLT: Yeah, go ahead.

Q Okay. General, when I was in Sakalaweyah a couple months ago, there was a nationalist group -- I can't remember the name off the top of my head -- the pro-Saddam -- the old army fighters, the old Republican Guard, and they were -- they had almost joined up with the marines, where they were saying that -- this to a -- that the -- while what was going on, you know, Americans versus -- you know, the coalition versus them was not good, you know, AQI was worse. Are you seeing any of that or has that almost relationship fallen apart?

GEN. STONE: Well, I mean, we're -- you were broken through a portion of that. But, you know, what we're seeing is a fairly significant number of nationalist groups who -- well, certainly

who understand the threat of al Qaeda. And you've heard about the tribal enlightenment; that is beginning, I think, to flow into other areas. But, yes, you do see an increased number that want to engage in supporting a coalition position.

Q Excellent. Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: And Dave Price.

Q Good morning, General. Thanks for taking the time to talk to us. Dave Price from Dean's World. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the biometrics, how about we're identifying which detainees are a real threat -- you know, when they show up in one AO and then they show up in another, just so that it's not turning into a catch and release. That's something I've heard criticized a lot, is that, you know, we bring in the guys, we don't really know who they are or what they've done before, and that they're having trouble passing these on as something that's transitioned in and out, the databases weren't getting transferred between the units.

GEN. STONE: Yeah, it's a good question. First of all, every detainee is (batted ?) when they come into the system down at the very base level. Those databases are now transferred up, and even though we (bat ?) them again to confirm who they are when they come into the theater internment facility, which is, as you know, the results of 14 days of hard work on behalf of the divisions below us to determine whether they want to hold on to them or not. Once they make that determination, then we've got them.

But I will tell you, knowing that they were out there before isn't so much the solution as understanding who they are when we get them.

So it's the psychological work that we're doing, the assessment and the evaluation, the engagement with them in these various courses and instruction. That's what's telling us who they are.

And in terms of, are they recaptured, we're very clear about who are being recaptured. We know the rates; we know who they are. We know their engagements, so much so that we are able now to -- with the work of the higher judicial court -- that's like the Iraqi supreme court -- we have developed a new guarantor -- pledge-and-guarantor system, which means that if they get rebatted the next time, after being in the theater internment facility, they will in turn go to an Iraqi correctional system. So I think we're beginning to get our arms around that problem.

Q So how would you characterize the Iraqi judicial system at this point? I've seen some very rough numbers. I think they said that there was something like 1,000 judges trained now. And I understand they have more of a French system where the judges are actually a prosecutor as well.

How are they coming along in terms of corruption or lack of corruption? Or just generally how would you characterize that?

GEN. STONE: Well, I'm not a legal expert. And we use the triple-CI, the Criminal Court of Iraq, Central Criminal Court of Iraq. And we have found the four panels that we're involved with to -- who are made up -- (audio break) -- both Sunni and Shi'a to be very fair and balanced. The cases that we get oftentimes do not have particularly good evidence, and we're working hard to kind of fix that.

But you're right. It's a French system that came out of the Middle East. It's been here for a long time. It is not like the one you and I have.

Most of the work is done by the judicial investigator early on, such that when the judicial investigator takes his notes and puts together the statements, signs them and turns them in, that really constitutes evidence. And it's based on that, in a very short trial really, that the judge will make his determination. Even though there is representation or can be representation from both sides, it is not that kind of system that we have.

For us, we are getting about a 68 percent conviction rate. We can do better when we -- you know, when we have better evidence up front. We are getting a death sentence now, in my time since we've been here with some of the changes, every two days. So for us, the guys that need to receive the most harsh penalty are getting them.

Q How about political pressure from -- did you see much of that in the judicial system?

I've heard more of that on the Shi'a side, which I think you guys probably aren't as involved with.

GEN. STONE: Yeah, again, my sole exposure to the legal system is the CCCI. That is, I think, the most stable legal component of this country. You know, we are, by the way, only about 40 percent -- 30 to 40 percent of their workload, so, you know, that means they're seeing an awful lot of civilian cases on the outside. And the civilian cases are getting the same level of non-sectarian, even-balanced -- I mean, we understand now very clearly when a case does not get a conviction why that happened. You know, it doesn't seem to be under any new pressure or any kind of a sectarian attitude at all, but there are other judges. There are judges way out in hinterland, and there, I think they experience, because of their locale, far more threats so much so that it's -- I have flown judges from the four panels that serve us, I have got them in airplanes and flown them out so that cases could be heard out in, you know, Mosul or in Al Anbar province.

Q Yeah, that's interesting because we hear almost nothing about this in the media. It sounds like there's quite a bit more rule of law than you would gather from just reading the headlines.

GEN. STONE: That's -- I mean, look, you know, I don't try to embellish anything, I mean I really don't. I'm about as, you know, permanently pragmatic and straightforward as they come.

All I can tell you is we are in the court system every day. I have 60, you know, or more guards; I've got 20 or so legal folks moving cases. We are involved with every single coalition case. I mean, we don't try them; we don't even get in the courtroom, we're on the outside, but we're

simply trying to ensure evidence that we can find and scrape up is brought in. And therefore, we engage with these guys every single day. I meet with them every week, and the court system that I'm engaged with is honest, direct, is taking any kind of, you know, grasp that I'm aware of. So I'm personally very pleased with it.

The problem is personal security. You know, in the last couple of years 26 of these guys have been killed, so, you know, we do our very level best to assure that the courthouse and where they're at has got that kind of protection because any number of people would like to see these honest judges dead.

MR. HOLT: And Bruce McQuain. Q I'm sorry, I had it on mute. General, I obviously came in a little late. I was wondering if you could kind of give me the big picture on the pledge and guarantor program because I'm not at all clear on that.

GEN. STONE: You bet.

In 1957, there was a process here in Iraq that allowed for two things to happen: a perpetrator, you know, of something, of an Iraqi law to come in and to be able to bring a guarantor with them as a sign of pledge, and that pledge is something that has been recreated, rewritten, retested.

And now for the theater internment facility releases I am making it essentially mandatory. There are some exceptions -- you know, expeditionary releases or health things, that sort of thing -- but on balance it's the norm. And what it says is that there's a -- and we have a judge assigned and we have a courtroom assigned. We can handle up to 50 or more a day now, where they come in, they sit down, they get a lecture from the judge; they sign that they understand that they are not to become a security threat, that if they do that, that the next time that they are, you know, batted, that that will be a conviction of at least a misdemeanor, but everything that they did before will then be considered in in terms of sentencing. They, then, will bypass U.S. detention, and they will go direct to Iraqi correctional system of prisons throughout Iraq.

So it's a very powerful motivation. Along with that is a family member or a guarantor. The judges prefer that it not be an organization -- like a sheikh or something -- if possible because they're always afraid of the -- you know, sort of taking advantage of that. But the ones that we've done so far have had family members come in, they have said they will sign for this guy's conduct, and they have all universally had to pay -- you know, I don't want to say a bond, but they don't pay the money; it's a promissory note that if the guy gets wrapped up, that that will -- that the court will be allowed to collect that.

So it's a very powerful instrument. We've watched in some almost comical ways here, worked very effectively; comical in that we had a guy that was supposed to be released, he went through the whole process, he didn't -- you know, there was some confusion about, you know, his guarantor. He came back and wanted to stand there while the judge ripped up and tore up his thing and take all of his stuff and burn it up. So they take it very serious.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And had a few folks join us. Who else is on the line? Anybody --

Q Actually, this is Garamone (sp). General, just a real quick question. When you have these folks in the detention facilities, do you have folks working with them? Do you have -- do you bring in people from, you know, I guess local folks, local imams or something to work with them to try to convince them to rehab their ways? GEN. STONE: Yeah, that's actually the strength of this program. I mentioned in the earlier statement that we're no longer holding. We are -- we've got a number of programs starting with a very extensive study of who the enemy is. This study will probably go on -- out in February, but we've got some interesting conclusions now.

And what we're doing is, based on those categories, we've got one -- grades one through five going on. I've got more than 3,000 detainees currently in classes learning. We've got a hundred now in an experiment on a anti-religious program, and what we're finding in those four categories and the anti-religious program is that we have to now break that up as well.

I'd love to talk to you about it. It's a fascinating set of observations.

We have a (Vocheck ?) program in five different vocations, and we are building factories for (on-the-tip ?) work. So guys are going to be building bricks and then sewing clothes, all of it as a part of a very coherent plan that has been synergized from seven different anti- extremist schools throughout Islam, and it includes health, it includes exercise, it includes separation of the jihadists. There's 27 different attributes to it, and we're working on every one of them. So we have taken our population, divided it up, and we're wading into them in a very, very proactive manner.

Q Okay. And foreign detainees, General -- how do you work them?

GEN. STONE: Well, foreign detainees -- we have third-country nationals -- and to date, we actually hold about a hundred of those. There are a total of 276 third-country nationals that are also in custody, but those hundred that we're focused on, those are the foreign fighters. Not every third-country national is, you know, is necessarily, you know, somebody who is espousing; they just happen to be wrapped up -- much like some of these other guys are.

But the answer is if they have been convicted, they are in an Iraqi prison, and many of them have been. Many of these guys are the ones that have gotten death sentences. But the rest of them are either in custody -- and by that, I mean either going through our rehabilitation programs -- or they are in custody awaiting a trial as we collect more evidence.

MR. HOLT: All right. Anyone else not get a chance to --

Q Yeah -- yeah, hi. This is --

MR. HOLT: I'm sorry.

Q Hi. It's Andrew Lubin from ON Point again, General. Can you talk to us a bit about engaging the clerics? Are you the one to convince them, to convince the imams that working with the coalition is a good thing and not a bad thing?

GEN. STONE: Well, the answer to that is yes. I mean, I already got five of them working for me. You know, and we're going to expand that number into the hundreds. We've had good meetings with the clerics that have aligned themselves with Multinational Forces. We are looking even outside the boundaries that refugees who have left the countries, who have left because they were moderates and were run out -- so we're looking at those guys.

You know, I'm the only guy here that, you know, walks and talks to 2,000 al Qaeda every day, looks at them, you know, views them, understands them, and they do not put any fear into me or to our guys, and nor do they put them into the minds of the moderates. One of the most interesting aspects in the last couple weeks have been that the moderate compounds of detainees, moderate Sunnis in particular, have engaged with the imams, moderate imams that we have employ, and they have, in not particularly too nice a fashion, crushed some of the guys that espouse al Qaeda viewpoints, such that we had to kind of get them out and get them into a different compound.

I am very, very hopeful about this. I'm very pragmatic on the fact that the al Qaeda in our trial have not been able to be broken down yet. The top theory -- they have come around a little at a time. They are by and large uneducated. But once we can get them to read the Koran, we are finding some, in the Socratic method that the imams and the psychiatrists and the counselors use, we are finding that they are beginning to bend and turn the corner. And the moderates -- the moderates are no issue.

Just as a passing side note, we started with a program for the youth, and we dropped it after we did some testing and find out that the youth actually didn't have any inclination towards religiosity to start off with, so we decided that we were, you know, potentially planting seeds and so we stopped.

Q That's even amongst the -- that's -- is this mostly Sunni or is also with the Shi'a? I mean, the Sunnis seem overall to be pretty -- pretty common-sensed and pretty moderate the last year.

GEN. STONE: The -- yeah; 86 percent of my population are Sunni, and the balance are Shi'a. Our Shi'a are not the problem. We have JAM members, we've got some extremists, and I don't want to misrepresent their orientation, but in detention, they are not as hotheaded as the Sunnis can be.

Q Okay.

MR. HOLT: All right. Matt Armstrong.

Q Hi. Matt Armstrong, (Man Runner ?). Thanks. Sorry for joining late.

Easy, quick question: How is this being captured and institutionalized for future use if necessary?

GEN. STONE: The -- we are employing, or just actually employed, a lessons learned team. We're A) bringing in the Army's lessons learned team. B) I've hired an independent firm who's on contract, and they've shown up and they are running this motivation and morale study, the first in-depth study of an enemy while engaged since Vietnam. And along with that, we are capturing all these programs, because they are laced in with them. In other words, you can't study the enemy, who they are, make sure whether or not you have had an effective change and then not be able to discuss the program that you have going on with it.

Now there are many other aspects of things we have done. For example, as a -- as the general, I do not talk to compound chiefs anymore. I have never talked to a compound chief. I won't negotiate with a compound chief. That has directed the orientation back into the compound. So there are a number of those kinds of things that the lessons learned guys are going to be digging in to and just in terms of how to conduct business. But on the most important matter of, how do you change and alter the behavior of somebody who is inclined towards using violence and justifying it by the Koran, that work is, you know, is being studied at great, great depth.

I want to make sure you understand one other point. The vast majority of these guys are here because they were fearful, threatened or unemployed. So those guys have not been particularly easy -- I mean particularly hard to change.

What we -- my greatest fear in coming into this was evidenced by some of the studies we did, that we may be actually creating, you know, the next army inside the detention center. So that's why I have been reluctant to do mass releases as have happened in the past. And essentially I have no intent to release until I know that we have gone through these panels.

The other thing that we're doing that's never been done before is, every detainee is now being interviewed by U.S. servicemembers. Imagine being held for a year or two or three and never having been told one on one why you were being held. Once we do that, that starts a dialogue. We can get through it, and the testing we're doing gives us a confidence level that we're going to be able to reduce the recidivism rate, and that's how I'm going to measure success here. You know, we're not doing bad with the current guys -- around 90 percent, it seems. But if we can get that up to a very high number and society catches up with their need to be employed and we crush al Qaeda's ability to be around to pay them, we're going to have a win and we're going to have a model for how to do this going forward.

MR. HOLT: Okay, any other follow-ups?

Okay, Major General Stone, thank you very much for being with us. Do you have any closing thoughts for us?

GEN. STONE: You know, I just have the same line that I used at our commanders conference yesterday, with remarkably 40-some generals -- just a few of us commanders sitting around the table, but there were like legions of them. I just said, look, we must learn and adapt and until we do, we don't leave. And that's the same message I'd like to leave for you.

You know, we're not going to pull out of this thing until we understand this enemy. They are coming to us specifically here. Regardless of how we got here, my time in Pakistan and Afghanistan tells me, they're going to search us out. They are arrogant enough at this point to believe that they are genuinely going to win.

And I think there is no middle ground on this, that if we do not meet them, fight them, adapt our techniques, accept those times when we fail, readjust and learn and come back in the American sort of ingenuitive way of fighting, then I think we're making a huge mistake. So I'd just end with the same thing I said. We must learn and adapt, and that we don't leave until we have.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir. Thank you very much for your time. And hopefully we can follow up here a little bit later and talk some more about this. We appreciate you being with us on the Bloggers Roundtable this morning, sir. Thank you very much.

GEN. STONE: My honor -- thanks for what you guys are doing. Talk to you later.

END.